

NOTE

LUKE'S DESCRIPTION OF THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

Two years ago in my article on the virginal conception¹ I invited scholars to discuss in a positive way the problems left by the evidence surveyed in my treatment. I am delighted that this invitation has been accepted as regards the biblical evidence by J. A. Fitzmyer²—indeed, especially delighted since his detailed study confirms my briefer remarks on almost every scriptural point. In a brief note let me comment on one of the rare points on which we disagree, a disagreement that in no way detracts from my appreciation of his contribution.

I expressed my view of the Lucan infancy account thus: "It is lucidly clear that Matthew believed in Mary's bodily virginity before the birth of Jesus (1:25). It is harder to *prove* the case for Luke; but 3:23 indicates that Luke did not think that Joseph begot Jesus after the angel's annunciation to Mary."³ Fitzmyer⁴ is less certain than I that the Lucan account "really rules out human intercourse." He states: "When this account is read in and for itself—without the overtones of the Matthean annunciation to Joseph—every detail of it could be understood of a child to be born to Mary in the usual human way. . . ." He discussed four points in the Lucan account that seem to point toward virginal conception but finds a certain ambiguity in all of them.

I would like to mention a fifth argument that persuades me that Luke did intend to describe a virginal conception. It is common in the exegesis of chapter 1 of Luke to point out the close parallels that exist between the annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist (henceforth JBap) and the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus.⁵ One annunciation is clearly patterned on the other. Moreover, it is generally

¹THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 33 (1972) 3-34, esp p 33 The article has been incorporated in a revised form in my book *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, 1973)

²"The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 34 (1973) 541-75

³In my article, p 9, n 17, in my book, p 31, n 37

⁴*Art cit*, pp 566-67

⁵Note the following (a) both annunciations have an introduction that mentions the husband, the wife, and the tribal origin, (b) in both annunciations the angel is identified as Gabriel, (c) in both annunciations Gabriel addresses the visionary by name and urges "Do not be afraid", (d) the phrasing of the messages in 1 13 and 1 31 about the birth and naming of the son is very similar, (e) each message is followed by a poetic passage predicting the future greatness of the child, (f) in turn, this prediction is greeted by a "How?" question posed by Zechariah and by Mary respectively, (g) finally, the "How?" question is answered by a sign from the angel showing the power of God

agreed that Luke constructed this parallelism between the two annunciations to underline the superiority of Jesus over JBap. For example, while JBap is "great before the Lord" (1:15), Jesus is "great" without qualification (1:32).⁶ While JBap is "filled with a holy spirit even from his mother's womb" (1:15), the very conception of Jesus involves God's holy spirit coming upon Mary (1:35). While JBap will "make ready for the Lord a prepared people" (1:17), Jesus will actually rule over the house of Jacob/Israel and possess an eternal kingdom (1:33).

Now what kind of conception of Jesus is indicated by this pattern of a parallelism indicating superiority? The manner of the conception of JBap is extraordinary: the power of God is necessary to overcome both the barrenness of Elizabeth and the advanced age of the two parents. To have a natural conception of Jesus would reverse the pattern of his superiority, since it would mean that there was nothing extraordinary about the manner of his conception.⁷ But a virginal conception of Jesus would fit the pattern perfectly, for then the power of God would overcome not simply the incapacity of the two parents but the complete absence of a human father.⁸

This argument for the virginal conception from the pattern of the two annunciations becomes even stronger when we compare the respective introductions to the annunciations and the corresponding "How?" questions posed by Zechariah and Mary to the angel. In introducing the parents of JBap, Luke tells the reader: "They had no child in as much as Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (1:7). Luke then has Zechariah repeat this information to the angel in a "How?" question in 1:18 ("How shall I know this, for I am an old man and my

⁶The comparison continues in later passages: JBap "will be called the prophet of the Most High" (1:76), while Jesus "will be called the Son of the Most High" (1:32).

⁷To read 1:35 as dealing only with the extraordinary nature of the child does not do justice to the parallelism of the pattern. The angelic statement *preceding* the "How?" question in each annunciation tells of the greatness of the child; the statement after the "How?" logically pertains to the conception.

⁸I have said that scholars generally agree that one annunciation is patterned on the other. The manner of the conception of JBap has Old Testament parallels; the manner of the conception of Jesus does not. On the other hand, the association of an annunciation and a virginal conception with the birth of Jesus is found in Matthew as well as in Luke. I would therefore agree with those who maintain that, if there is a pre-Lucan tradition for chapter 1, it is in the annunciation of the birth of *Jesus*, and that Luke himself has completely fashioned the story of the annunciation of the birth of JBap by using Old Testament models to form a parallel annunciation. Of course, he has also rewritten in his own style any pre-Lucan tradition in the annunciation of the birth of Jesus. That tradition may have consisted chiefly of a Christological statement about sonship of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, a translation of that statement into historical terms involving a virginal conception, and the tendency to dramatize the message in the literary form of an annunciation. All three points are found independently in Matthew.

wife is advanced in years?") in order to set the stage for the wondrous conception of JBap to be made possible by God. Similarly, in introducing the parents of Jesus, Luke tells the reader twice that Mary was a virgin (1:27). If he is following the pattern, this should be relevant to the manner of conception. And Luke does follow the pattern exactly, for he has Mary repeat this information to the angel in a "How?" question in 1:34 ("How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?"). Logically this question must set the stage for the wondrous conception of Jesus to be made possible by God. In other words, the conception of Jesus must involve the fact mentioned in the introduction that Mary is a virgin, even as the conception of JBap involved the fact mentioned in the introduction that Elizabeth was barren and both parents were aged. An extraordinary conception is involved in both annunciations; but Luke presents Zechariah as not believing the lesser miracle of God's overcoming barrenness and age, while he has Mary praised for her faith (1:45) in face of the greater miracle of God's overcoming the absence of sexual relations. Indeed, that very praise of her faith constitutes still another indication favorable to the thesis that Luke meant a virginal conception.

In my judgment this added evidence removes some of the ambiguity from the four points that Fitzmyer discussed and found wanting. And so I would reiterate my view that "Luke did not think that Joseph begot Jesus after the angel's annunciation to Mary," and I would not agree that "every detail of it [the Lucan account] could be understood of a child to be born to Mary in the usual human way. . . ."

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